Pagans and the Temple – Jimmy Akin

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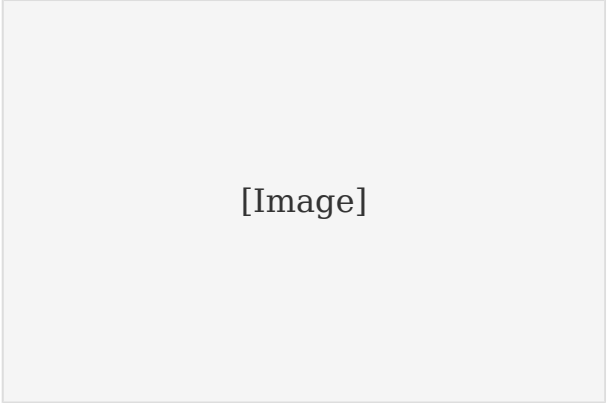

For some time I've been meaning to write something about how pagans frequently offered sacrifices–and other gifts–at the Jerusalem temple, but I haven't had a chance yet.

Until I have time, I'll use this post to collect notes on the phenomenon.

It's easy for us to impose ideas on later ages on what we read in the Bible, and one of these is the idea that the ancient Jews were so opposed to paganism that they wouldn't let non-Jews have anything to do with the temple in Jerusalem.

This was not the attitude of the Jewish people, or the temple authorities, for most of the time that the temple stood.

In fact, the temple featured a whole courtyard–its largest area–which was known as the "court of the gentiles," where non-Jews could come and worship God (regardless of whatever gods they may have worshipped back home).

The attitude of many was that, while worshipping idols elsewhere was bad, it was okay for gentiles to worship God at his temple in Jerusalem.

An illustration of this is found in the apocryphal book of 3 Maccabees, which recounts a time when Pharaoh Ptolemy IV Philopator of Egypt (reigned 221-203 B.C.; that's him on the coin) came to Jerusalem and offered sacrifice there. We read that after the battle of Raphia:

[**6**] Now that he had foiled the plot, **Ptolemy** decided to visit the neighboring cities and encourage them.

[**7**] By doing this, and by endowing their sacred enclosures with gifts, he strengthened the morale of his subjects.
[**8**] Since the Jews had sent some of their council and elders to greet him, to bring him gifts of welcome, and to congratulate him on what had happened, he was all the more eager to visit them as soon as possible.
[**9**] **After he had arrived in Jerusalem, he offered sacrifice to the supreme God and made thank-offerings and did what was fitting for the holy place.** Then, upon entering the place and being impressed by its excellence and its beauty,
[**10**] he marveled at the good order of the temple, and conceived a desire to enter the holy of holies [3 Macc 1:6-10].

Unfortunately, after Ptolemy gets a jones to see the holy of holies, things start to Not Go Well.

For our present purposes, though, note that the text says–and approves–of Ptolemy offering sacrifices to God at the temple (even though he himself, as one of the Ptolemaic pharaohs, was worshipped as a god by his own subjects back in Egypt!).

3 Maccabees probably was written sometime around 100 B.C., about a century after the events it describes, and–although later parts of the book are thought to be fictionalized–this part is generally regarded as having a historical basis.

Since we know from other sources (which I'll cite in my eventual piece on the subject) that pagans were known to offer sacrifices at the Jerusalem temple, there is nothing implausible about Ptolemy doing so.

The author (who was probably an Alexandrian Jew) also displays a positive attitude toward his doing so.

NOTES TO SELF: Some of the things I have memories of but need to look up for my future post include:

- Josephus's discussion in *Jewish War* about how preventing sacrifices for pagans from being offered at the temple was one of the inciting causes of the Jewish War of the A.D. 60s. He mentions specifically that, prior to this point, sacrifices were being offered for Caesar (despite him being worshipped elsewhere in the empire), and how many prior pagans and their rulers had made gifts to the temple. (Note to self: See also if there is a parallel to this passage in *Antiquities of the Jews*).
- Augustus once complimented one of his junior relatives (see below) for *not*

sacrificing in the temple when he could have (check Suetonius and, if not him, Tacitus).
- Check the language used in Scripture for Cyrus the Great's donations to the temple.
- Note Jesus' reference to Isaiah 56:7's statement that the temple would be a house of prayer for the gentiles. Also, think about Isaiah 66's statement that gentiles would worship God at the temple in the restoration of Israel. (The Isaianic material may not fully fit the pattern on a literal level, but may be related).

UPDATE 1: The passage I was thinking of regarding Augustus is in Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, "Augustus" 93:

[93] As for the religious customs of foreigners, some he **[Augustus]** regarded with reverence as ancient and traditional, while the rest he held in disdain. For he was initiated into the mysteries at Athens and when later at Rome he was sitting in judgement in a case concerning the privileges of priests of Athenian Ceres and some rather secret matters were being discussed, he sent away the court and the crowd of bystanders and heard the disputants alone. On the other hand, not only did he omit to make a small detour to see Apis [the sacred bull in Egypt], when travelling through, but **he even praised his grandson Gaius because on a journey through Judaea he did not pay his respects in Jerusalem.**

Note: The Gaius in question is not Caligula but this one, who was Augustus's biological grandson (via his daughter Julia). Caligula was biologically Augustus's great grandson (via Julia via Agrippina the Elder). He could be considered a legal grandson in that Caligula was adopted by Tiberius, who was adopted by Augustus, but this happened long after Augustus was dead. Also, Gaius campaigned as far east as Parthia, while I don't recall Caligula ever campaigning in the east. Most decisively, Caligula was maybe two years old when Augustus died, so it certainly couldn't have been him. Suetonius seems to refer to this Gaius as Augustus's grandson (during his lifetime) as a way of distinguishing him from Caligula.

UPDATE 2: Here's more info on Gentiles and the Jewish temple–drawn from Philo of Alexandria and Herod Agrippa I during the crisis over Caligula's statue.

Jimmy was born in Texas, grew up nominally Protestant, but at age 20 experienced a profound conversion to Christ. Planning on becoming a Protestant seminary professor, he started an intensive study of the Bible. But the more he immersed himself in Scripture the more he found to support the Catholic faith, and in 1992 he entered the Catholic Church. His conversion story, "A Triumph and a Tragedy," is published in Surprised by Truth. Besides being an author, Jimmy is the Senior Apologist at Catholic Answers, a contributing editor to Catholic Answers Magazine, and a weekly guest on "Catholic Answers Live." View all posts by Jimmy Akin

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